



# EVERYTHING LEFT BEHIND

INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN COLOMBIA

**AMNESTY**  
INTERNATIONAL



**'THE DISPLACED FAMILIES LIVE IN POOR AREAS WHICH ARE DANGEROUS. THERE ARE NO SCHOOLS BUT THERE ARE PHONES. THERE'S A LOT OF PROSTITUTION AND ROBBERIES. 12-YEAR-OLD GIRLS ARE TAKEN [INTO PROSTITUTION]... PEOPLE'S DIGNITY IS FOR SALE.**

A displaced person, member of an organization of displaced people, Florencia, Caquetá Department, September 2008

Each year, hundreds of thousands of women, men and children join the millions of people already internally displaced in Colombia. The incidence of displacement in Colombia is one of the highest in the world. Between 3 and 4 million people have been forced to flee their homes and seek refuge elsewhere in the country; a further 500,000 are believed to have fled to neighbouring countries.

The scale of the tragedy can sometimes obscure the individual and continuing human suffering behind the numbers. Some people are displaced for relatively short periods of time; others have been unable to return to their homes for many years and fear they may never be able to do so. Still others are displaced time and again, increasing their insecurity, entrenching their exclusion and driving them ever deeper into poverty.

Internally displaced people are individuals or groups of people who have been forced to leave their place of residence, as a result of armed conflict, generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who remain within their country's territory.

*"I'm from the department of Cesar... I was displaced for the first time in April 2004... Los Elenos [ELN] took us by surprise... They burst in angrily and took everything, money, my husband's documents, everything... They arrived at 6pm; and gave us till 9am [to leave]. We took our clothes and left. We had to leave the animals, beds and the rest..."*

*"In 2008, the ELN came to our area again... they were looking for paramilitaries... They arrived at night and killed a man ... They knocked on the door and called him [my husband]... A neighbour helped us get out. We fled with all the children... At 3am we left Cúcuta in the small car we had for our work... In Cúcuta rents are very high. That's why we came to Catatumbo... If you pay the rent, there's nothing left for food."*  
Displaced woman, Catatumbo, February 2009

The reasons people are forced to flee vary. However, the one overwhelming factor is the continuing armed conflict. The Colombian government has repeatedly stated that there is no internal armed conflict in Colombia, but the continuing mass displacement of communities belies this claim. According to the human rights organization CODHES (Consultoría para los



Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento), more than 380,000 people were forced to flee their homes in 2008, an increase of more than 24 per cent over 2007. This rise has been put down in large part to intense fighting between the security forces and guerrilla groups, especially in the south of the country.

*"There are clashes between the guerrillas and the national army... The guerrillas and the army tell the people to leave, that there are going to be clashes... The guerrillas arrive and say 'collaborate with us; if you don't you have to get out'. The army does the same. Which is worse? At the moment I think the government promises things that it doesn't deliver. Both are bad."*

L. B. D. G., a peasant farmer from San José de Fragua, Caquetá Department, October 2008

The security forces' counter-insurgency strategy is largely based on the premise that those living in conflict areas are part of the enemy, simply because of where





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## THE CONFLICT IN COLOMBIA

There is little agreement on the underlying causes of the long-running conflict in Colombia. However, the fighting has provided a useful cover for those seeking to expand and protect economic interests. The civilian population continues to bear the brunt of the violence. All parties to the conflict have been responsible for a sustained campaign of serious human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law. The main protagonists in the conflict are:

### THE ARMED FORCES

For over 40 years there have been numerous and persistent reports documenting the direct responsibility of the security forces in grave human rights violations. Those abuses continue today. Of particular concern in recent years has been the apparent increase in extrajudicial executions of civilians committed directly by the security forces.

### PARAMILITARY GROUPS

Paramilitaries have their origin in civilian “self-defence” groups, originally set up under Colombian law but subsequently outlawed in 1989. These were originally created by the Colombian army to act as auxiliaries during counter-insurgency operations. Despite government claims that all paramilitaries demobilized in a government-sponsored programme that began in 2003, such groups continue to operate, often in collusion with or with the consent of the security forces, and to commit human rights violations.

### GUERRILLA GROUPS

The first of the guerrilla groups emerged in the 1950s. Over the decades, the guerrillas have created extensive strongholds, principally in rural areas, but have been driven back in recent years. Guerrilla groups, notably the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the smaller National Liberation Army (ELN) are responsible for repeated human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law.

they live. The result of labelling communities in an area as “sympathetic” to guerrilla forces has been a pattern of abuses. Human rights defenders, trade unionists, campesinos (peasant farmers), and Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendant communities living in areas of strategic importance have also been targeted.

Guerrilla and paramilitary groups have also seen communities in conflict areas as either their allies or their enemies. They too have failed to respect the right of civilians not to be dragged into the conflict.

The consequence has been a litany of human rights abuses: enforced disappearances, killings, abductions, torture, the use of child soldiers and widespread sexual violence, mainly against women and girls. Terrorized by all sides, many communities in conflict zones have had no option but to flee. However, that too can bring with it dangers and difficulties.

**Homes of internally displaced people in Alto Cazucá neighbourhood, Bogotá, February 2007. The neighbourhood, which houses a high percentage of internally displaced people from many parts of the country, suffers from endemic poverty and high levels of violence.**





**Left:** Displaced children in La Reliquia, Villavicencio, Meta Department, November 2003. The family had arrived a few weeks earlier and were in the process of registering to get assistance for the children.

**Right:** A displaced woman washes clothes in a rural area on the coast in the municipality of Los Córdoba, Córdoba Department, February 2007.

## FLEEING FOR THEIR LIVES

A common experience shared by many displaced families and communities, is having to flee very suddenly, in situations where their lives were under imminent threat. Some become separated from their families or communities; most are forced to flee taking only what they can carry.

*"The guerrillas tied my hands with triangular-shaped bindings. They made me walk for an hour and a half. That night they had me on a post in the jungle. It was awful thinking about my wife who was about to give birth and about my children... They pushed me around to get me to tell the truth. They were waiting for a new order from the commander so that they could shoot me. At 7:00 am, the next day, a call arrived... The caller said: 'I don't have a firm decision from the commander. Release that son-of-a-bitch and tell him to get out of the region in two hours without taking anything.' They let me go: 'You've got two hours to disappear, we don't let people off.' I was an hour and a half from home and there were 30 minutes left... I went back home and saw*

*the most dreadful thing; they had set fire to my house as well as the chainsaw, the TV, clothes, everything... [ I ] was afraid they were coming after me.*

*I was crying; [I felt] very sorry for the children who want milk, clothes."*

M.C., a peasant farmer from the municipality of San Roque, Caquetá Department, September 2008

Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendant and campesino communities make up a disproportionate number of those who have been internally displaced. For such communities, whose identities and livelihoods are intimately linked with the land where they live and work, the trauma of displacement is particularly acute.

People often face severe economic and social difficulties when they are displaced. These are sometimes compounded by the tendency among many local and regional officials to stigmatize them. Sometimes displaced communities are labelled "guerrilla sympathizers" simply because they have fled from areas with a heavy guerrilla presence or accused of bringing the conflict with them. The hostility with which displaced communities are sometimes received can deter people from admitting that they were

displaced by threats and violence. This in turn can deny them access to what little help the authorities have made available for displaced people.

B.R.M.P., a 24-year-old worker, went to the Istmina area in Chocó Department in 2008 in search of work in the mines. One Friday evening in July as he was talking with friends in central Istmina, paramilitaries shot a man dead right in front of him. The paramilitaries fired after him as he ran from the scene. A few days later, as he was playing football in the neighbourhood of El Futuro, he saw the same paramilitaries make their way towards him. As he started to run away they opened fire. He managed to get away and fled the region in fear of his life.

Some of those who flee are accidental victims of the conflict who found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. Others have been targeted as part of a deliberate policy to remove people from areas which are believed to be of strategic importance or under





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“enemy” control. Still others have been forced to leave their lands because of the rich resources they hold; forcibly removing the existing inhabitants and expropriating their lands opens up the possibility of large profits for those willing to commit human rights violations.

## A QUESTION OF LAND AND RESOURCES

Much of the wealth accumulated by paramilitary groups and their backers has been based on the appropriation – or misappropriation – of land through violence or the threat of violence. Some estimates suggest that between 4 and 6 million hectares of land owned by thousands of campesinos, or collectively owned by Indigenous People and Afro-descendant communities, have been stolen in this way.

*“It was my turn to get out of the area. The violence had worn me down. The PM [paramilitaries], the army and the guerrillas are all there. [One of these groups] sent me a note saying they were going to kill me. It arrived one night. I found it at the foot of the*

*house; it was a short handwritten letter... One night a guy with a weapon came to my house. He gave us a fright. It was 8 o'clock at night. He was up to no good. He was circling round the house with a weapon, none of the family saw him but a neighbour did. They told us, you'd better get out. I left with my family, including my eldest daughter and her son. There are seven of us altogether.”*

*F. B. L. R., a peasant farmer from the municipality of Curillo, Department of Caquetá, October 2008*

Since 2003, paramilitary groups have been involved in a government-sponsored demobilization process. The legal framework introduced to facilitate this process – principally the Justice and Peace Law – states that those members of paramilitary groups who wish to qualify for the benefits set out in the Law must participate in special hearings, in which they reveal details of any human rights violations they have committed, and return any land or assets stolen. Amnesty International has repeatedly highlighted the flawed nature of the process. More than six years later, paramilitary groups continue to operate and their victims continue to be denied truth, justice or reparation.

As part of the demobilization deal with the government, paramilitary leaders made a commitment to hand over stolen lands and other assets. However, so far, little land has been returned to the rightful owners. Much of the stolen land has been handed over to third parties – known as *testaferros* – often close family members or friends of paramilitaries. Passing on the land in this way effectively shields former paramilitaries, and their backers in business and politics, from scrutiny over how the land was acquired.

Measures have been introduced to provide limited financial compensation for some victims of human rights abuses. However, this is largely meaningless to those for whom land is central to their subsistence and way of life.

At particular risk of displacement are communities – predominantly Indigenous, Afro-descendant or campesino – in areas which have been earmarked for large economic projects, such as mineral and oil exploration, agro-industrial developments or hydro-electric installations.



Clashes in March 2007 between the security forces and the FARC in Río Tapaje led to the displacement of between 8,000 and 10,000 people. Most sought refuge in El Charco in temporary shelters. Most were eventually able to return home. However, around 80 families were still living in the temporary accommodation more than two years later.

**Above:** Scenes from a shelter for internally displaced people, in the municipality of El Charco, Nariño Department, September 2008. From top: A woman cooks the family meal; a displaced woman feeds her baby; a young boy plays with water – the shelter has no running water.



## WOMEN AND GIRLS

The trauma of displacement can be particularly profound for women. Many will have lost their partners to the conflict and need to provide for their families in very difficult conditions. Displacement shatters support networks and for many the loss of livestock, land and possessions destroys their main means of subsistence. If they manage to find shelter in nearby shanty towns, this is likely to be insecure and inadequate. Discrimination and exclusion also contribute to the barriers that many women face in getting access to the goods and services they and their families need.

In April 2008, the Colombian Constitutional Court issued a ruling on the rights of women displaced by the conflict. It made an explicit link between displacement and sexual violence.

The Court identified 10 specific risks facing women and girls in the context of the armed conflict that, taken together, explain why forced displacement has a particular and disproportionate impact on them. Women and girls are at greater risk of sexual violence, sexual exploitation or

sexual abuse in the context of the armed conflict. Prevailing social attitudes about women's roles mean they are at risk of being used as forced labour to carry out domestic work by one or other of the warring parties. Women are also targeted for abuse because of their real or supposed family or personal relations with members of one or other armed group. In families headed by women, children are at heightened risk of forced recruitment by armed groups and such families are also more likely to have their lands taken from them. The Court also highlighted the way discrimination increases the risks facing Indigenous and Afro-descendant women.

## INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND AFRO-DESCENDANT COMMUNITIES

Colombia is home to dozens of distinct Indigenous Peoples. They are at particular risk from the armed conflict and displacement which threaten their way of life and, in some cases, their very survival. Many of those driven from their lands by the warring parties have been dispersed to distant parts of the country, sometimes to





far away urban centres. There is an understandable fear among many that they will never go home.

In October 2008, 77 members of the Indigenous community of Pichindé in the Juná reservation, municipality of Bahía Solano, Chocó Department, were forced to flee their homes. Two months earlier, seven men wearing hoods entered the community and attacked its members, destroyed their homes and threatened to kill them if they did not leave. During these two months continuous threats were made against the community.

Many Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities live in areas where the conflict is most intense and which are rich in biodiversity, minerals and oil. Communities which have refused to take sides in the conflict and tried to defend their lands and their way of life have faced repeated and persistent threats and attacks.

In January 2009, the Colombian Constitutional Court issued a ruling on the rights of Indigenous Peoples displaced by the conflict. The Court explicitly linked forced displacement with the extinction of

**Above:** Displaced children in Norte de Santander show off their 'toys', a new litter of puppies, 2007.

**Facing page:** Wounaan women from Colombia who fled to Panama, 2008. The women were taking part in UNHCR vocational training for refugees, which is based on traditional skills.

Indigenous Peoples and urged the government to prevent such displacements and to pay particular attention to displaced Indigenous communities. It also drew attention to the underlying discrimination and exclusion which have helped ensure that abuses against Indigenous Peoples have been largely absent from the political agenda: "The Colombian Indigenous groups are especially defenceless and at risk from the armed conflict and its consequences, particularly displacement. They have to put up with the dangers associated with confrontation on top of the pre-existing structural situations of extreme poverty and institutional neglect that act as catalyzing factors for the serious individual and collective human rights violations that the penetration of the armed conflict into their territories has meant for them." (Unofficial translation)

More than 400 people fled their homes in Nariño Department in February 2009 after 17 people were killed by the FARC in the Torugaña-Telembí Indigenous reservation in Barbacoas municipality. Most of those displaced were members of the Awá Indigenous People. They left behind the land of their ancestors and risked their lives as they crossed territory littered with landmines.

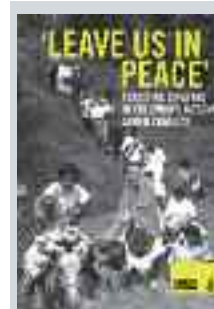
The guerrillas accused them of collaborating with the Colombian army. The bodies of another 10 people who fled after the massacre were reportedly found a few days later. The displaced families who reached neighbouring villages were in very poor health after their long journey through hazardous territory. Many of the children reportedly showed signs of chronic malnutrition.

Despite their refusal to be drawn into the conflict, the Awá are under threat from the activities of the warring factions. Some 21,000 Awá live in Nariño Department. They have been subjected to persistent harassment, threats, killings and forced displacement. The area in which they live is one of the most isolated and conflict-ridden in the country. For the past two years, Nariño Department has had the highest rate of forced displacement in the country.

In the face of the continued violence and displacement, the Colombian government's assertions that the impact of the internal armed conflict has abated ring very hollow. While it fails to acknowledge the very real effects of continued conflict, the human rights of millions of displaced people have little chance of being protected. Amnesty International calls on all parties to the conflict to put an end to the abuses that force people to flee their homes and to support communities under fire in their struggle to live in peace and security and to protect their way of life.



**Above:** Lanterns made by displaced Colombians lit the "river of light" in Bogotá, December 2008. Thousands of people gathered in a square in central Bogotá in memory of the thousands of internally displaced people and other victims of the conflict.



For more information about Amnesty International's concerns in the context of the armed conflict in Colombia, please see "Leave us in peace" – *Targeting civilians in Colombia's internal armed conflict* (Index: AMR 23/023/2008) ISBN 978-0-86210-442-9. The report is available from [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org) and [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)

**Cover:** The municipality of El Charco, Nariño Department, September 2008. Many internally displaced people live in El Charco, which has long been scarred by poverty. Many displaced people Amnesty International spoke to were living in extreme fear of further violence and victimization.

## TAKE ACTION NOW

CALL ON ALL PARTIES TO THE CONFLICT TO RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF CIVILIANS NOT TO BE DRAWN INTO THE CONFLICT.

### Call on the Colombian government to:

- Take effective measures to prevent forced displacement, including of Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities, campesinos and other groups who have a special dependency on or relationship with their lands;
- Ensure that measures are adopted to improve the effective protection of civilians, including internally displaced people, in line with the UN Guiding

Principles on Internal Displacement and the recommendations by UN human rights bodies and international human rights standards to which Colombia is a party;

- Establish a fair, transparent and effective process to identify and return all lands and other assets misappropriated by paramilitaries, including those transferred to third parties, and set a deadline for the return of these assets to their rightful owners or their families;

- Comply with the April 2008 Constitutional Court ruling on women and displacement and its January 2009 ruling on Indigenous Peoples and displacement;

- Take decisive action to confront and dismantle paramilitary groups, and investigate and break their links with the security forces, in accordance with repeated UN recommendations.

### Please write to:

President of Colombia  
Señor Presidente Álvaro Uribe Vélez  
Presidente de la República,  
Palacio de Nariño  
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Fax: +57 1 337 5890  
Salutation: Dear President Uribe/  
Excmo. Sr. Presidente Uribe

Minister of Defence  
Ministro de Defensa Nacional  
Ministerio de Defensa Nacional  
Avenida El Dorado  
Carrera 52 OFI. 217  
Centro Administrativo Nacional (CAN)  
Bogotá, Colombia  
Fax: +57 1 266 1003 (Ask "me da tono de fax, por favor")  
Salutation: Dear Minister/  
Estimado Sr. Ministro

Fiscal General de la Nación  
Dr. Mario Germán Iguarán Arana  
Fiscalía General de la Nación  
Diagonal 22B (Av. Luis Carlos Galán  
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Bogotá, Colombia  
Fax: +57 1 570 2000 (a message in Spanish will ask you to enter extension 2017)  
Salutation: Dear Mr Iguarán/  
Estimado Sr. Fiscal General

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**Amnesty International** is a global movement of 2.2 million people in more than 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion – funded mainly by our membership and public donations.

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